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Rita Bonds Oral History Interview

Kayla Kroder, Interviewer

Alton, Illinois

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Kayla Kroder (KK): This is Kayla Kroder and I will be interviewing Rita Bonds. The interview is taking place at her home here in Alton, Illinois. Rita worked at the Owen's Illinois Glass factory. She currently works as a secretary for the NAACP. Thank you, Rita, for your time. So the first question is: where did you grow up?

Rita Bonds (RB): I grew up in Edwardsville, Illinois.

KK: Alright. What was it like growing up in Edwardsville?

RB: It was lots of fun. Lots of runnin' and freedom you know.

KK: Is there anything neat or special to do in Edwardsville? Was SIUE around? Or was that a new thing?

RB: Oh no, when I grew up it was still a very segregated. I went to a segregated school. I went to Lincoln School, which is closed now, and it is the Mannie Jackson Humanitarian shop now. And when I grew up, that was my school. I was the last class to graduate before they closed it down and integrated the schools in 1950.

KK: Wow. Whenever you graduated, what did you do?

RB: I went to SIU Carbondale.

KK: What did you major in?

RB: I was studying to be a nurse. And then my fiancée returned from the war, I think it was Iraq War, and then I got married and moved to Las Vegas, Nevada.

KK: That's really neat. What did you do in Las Vegas, Nevada?

RB: I was a military wife and I had my first child there. We lived near the desert so it was really interesting, and I was there when they shot off the atomic bomb, the first explosion. I was there and I could see the huge cloud from where I stayed. It was Nellis Air Force Base.

KK: Wow. So what were your thoughts on that?

RB: Yeah, "Wow." That was my thought. It is, I had read about it but, I was very young, I was like 20 years old, and I just thought it was fascinating. That I could see the huge mushroom cloud- and it was just like a mushroom.

KK: Where was this again?

RB: Nellis Air Force Base, in Las Vegas Nevada. We stayed in a small town called Henderson. And, my husband drove back and forth to Nellis Air Force base.

KK: When did you come back to Alton?

RB: Oh let's see...When he got, he transferred from Nellis Air Force base to Whiteman Air Force base in Missouri. And we moved back here and I stayed on the air base with him. We stayed in town first, in Sedalia Missouri. And then when we first moved back, he was going overseas, he went to a place called Thule. Thule Greenland, he there for about a year. And I stayed with my parents. And when he came back went to Sedalia, Missouri. He was stationed at Whiteman Air Force base.

KK: So whenever you guys left Whiteman, you came to Alton, then?

RB: When he retired. No, first, we stayed at Whiteman Air Force Base, and I had a couple more kids. We went to Madrid, Spain for 3 years, nine months. And when we left Spain, we came back to Whiteman. And it was almost time for him to retire. So he put in for- We came up to Whiteman and we stayed there and then the Vietnam War started. And he went to Vietnam and I moved back to Alton for that year while he was in Vietnam. And then he went to South Dakota for one year after Vietnam, and he retired at Ellsworth in South Dakota. And then we moved back to Alton.

KK: Okay. So at that time, you'd been maybe about 40 or 50 or so? [Yelling in background]

RB: Football game...the question again?

KK: Whenever you moved back to Alton, you were about 50?

RB: Let me see, how old I was?

KK: Yeah

RB: ...oh wow...no I was...when he retired I was about 35.

KK: Oh, that's wonderful. So the factory was still open then and it was.

RB: Right. When he retired and we moved back here he was looking for work, and I was too. And I had a friend that worked there, in the office. I forget what his title was. But, he worked there and one day he asked, me, "How would you like to go to work at the glass factory?" I said, "Well gee, I don't know, I've never worked at a factory before." And he said, "Well it's a glass factory where we make bottles and you would examine the bottles and pack them." And I said, "Well okay, I'll give it a try." And it was on the day they landed on the moon, that was the day that I was supposed to go down there for an interview. That would be July the 20th, right? Yeah. And he called me and told me to come down for an interview.

And I said, "Well I'm busy right now," because I was watching the TV, the landing on the moon. And so I didn't go for the interview. He called me the next day and said, "Why didn't you come for the interview." I said, "What interview?" [laughs] he said, "My supervisor called employment office and called for you to come for an interview." I said, "Oh, I was watching the landing on the moon, I didn't think about going and looking for a job." So he said, "Well I ask and see if you can come." So, he made arrangements for me to come to another interview friend in high places. So, he made arrangements, and I went down and started work the next week in the glass factory. I had never worked in a factory, in fact I had never worked outside the home before. Because I was a student, you know? And then I was a wife, mother, raising kids and so...I did volunteer work, but this was really something new for me.

KK: How like, what was it like when you first went in the factory? Was it overwhelming?

RB: Yeah. Very much so. But I was used to meeting strict people you know, because of travelling in the Air Force. And so, it was...I didn't know what to expect and we went to orientation you know and they told us what to expect and they showed us the factory. I was really overwhelmed because I had never been inside one. It was interesting, very interesting to see how the bottles were made. How they come out on this roller and they're really hot. It was like 100 degrees near the layer, where the bottles come out of the furnace room, and they mold and make the bottles. Then they come out under a long pad-like, bed-like roller. And they come out from under a curtain, and the workers stand there on either side of the layer and as they bottles come out, they're all numbered in rows. And pick up certain bottles to see if they have any defects. You pick them up and you look at them, examine them, and if they have defects you throw 'em away. They have an inspector who looks at them first. And if one of the molds has a defect they call out back, to the people making the bottles, and they will take the mold off and fix the defect, then replace the bottles. It was very interesting. They come out on like a big bed and they have rows and rows of bottles. I worked different companies, you know. Soda bottles...I didn't work on beer bottles at that time, that was another area. But we worked on medicine bottles and soda bottles, and just bottles people use for different things. There was another layer there for medical bottles that they put black plasma in.

KK: I know what you're talking about

RB: There was only one girl that worked that layer because the bottles came out so slow. And she could look at them, examine them, and then pack them. And she didn't have anyone working with her. And other layers usually had maybe 3 or 4 girls who pull the bottles off as they come through, and then they go down the line and you have girls standing at a light, and as they come under the light you can see the defects And they knock them down in a roller, and they roll them back to the back room, where they dump them, redo the glass, heat it again, and then redo the molds again. And then they come back out again, and hopefully you know the don't have defects. And then we get down to the other end and there are about 3 girls, and a light, and the inspector is there. And she will pull the defects out. She stands at the layer and she will cut the bottles, and measure to see if they're the right weight and see if they're the right density and thickness. She'll cut them and measure them and if they were okay, they would send them on down the roller. And we would stand under the light and pick them up, look at them, roll them over, look at the bottom, and then pack them in boxes. And they go down, don't stop, they keep going, and so you have to kind of work fast. Where I worked, there were like 3 girls standing there working, and as they would come under the light, if she missed one, because she couldn't see underneath the

bottle, we would get the bottle, we'd turn it up, look at the top to see if there was a crack in the top. We look, roll it in our hands to see if there's a crack on the side, flip it up, look under the bottom for cracks. And if they were okay, we'd put them in the box. And as the box got full, like 24 bottles in a box, then it would roll on down to the "End of the Layer," they called it. And there would be a young man there to take them off and then pack them on a crate you know. And roll it out to the warehouse.

KK: Wow

RB: And you had to work fast. Because if you didn't pull them off, that round table where the bottles went, it would fill up. And then they would start crashing and falling. And, it was really funny, the guys in the back room who made the bottles. If they heard all the bottles crashing, they knew they were losing money. So they want to know, "Why are you letting our bottles fall in the floor? Pack those bottles up!" You know? Yeah, it was really interesting. So you had to work fast. but you had to accurate also you didn't want to pack. And then we had an inspector, they would take the bottles to the warehouse and inspect them. And if they found too many defects they would send them back from the warehouse and they wouldn't get shipped out to the customer. They'd go back to the warehouse and the girls who, it was sometimes a special group of girls that would go to the warehouse, and redo those bottles. And go over them again, pull out that- they all had numbers on them, and they pull out certain numbers, and throw those away. And repack the bottles to be shipped to the customer.

KK: That seems like that would be actually pretty tough to do.

RB: No, it wasn't tough. It was interesting. Well, I thought it was interesting. Cuz I had never experienced working before, so to me, it was really fascinating. To see, to see it work. And there was one, where you made baby food. And they were really strict on packing baby food bottles. Because that was, you know, you don't want to send broken bottles. because as they leave there, they'd go to the company and they would pack baby food in them. And you didn't want them to pack, pour applesauce or green beans into a bottle, and it would break? Well That would stop their production, and mess up the whole thing. They'd have to stop production, clean up the broken bottles of baby food, and then start over. So we had to really be careful. But that's on all of them though, be really careful you know about sending out defective bottles. Because it would go to the manufacturer and if you broke up too many bottles they would lose that contract, you know? You see what I mean? So we had to really be careful about sending out defective bottles. They call it "Ware" W-A-R-E. They called it WARE, you know, That was the term for the bottles we did.

KK: WOW, That's really neat. So, where there any benefits to working for the factory?

RB: Yeah there was a union. We had a union there. They paid good money. Well, I thought it was good at the time. Cuz I had never worked before. They had a union and they had hospitalization if anyone got hurt, you went to the doctor there at the factory there. And if you were sick enough you could go home. You had breaks. You worked so many hours and then you got a break, and then you got a lunch break. There was young lady in charge of the shift, there were three shifts. I worked B. there was A, B, C, and D. And I worked B shift. And if you worked on line you didn't go home until someone came to relieve you. A group had to come and relieve you. You couldn't just walk off, and cuz the bottles kept going. So you had to wait for the shifts. They shifts were like 7 in the morning till 3 in the afternoon, and then 3 to

11. There was another shift from 11 to 6 in the morning. Well 7. And you had a break, and you had a lunch room where you go. Not a lunchroom, but a room where you go to eat your lunch. They didn't have a cafeteria. You brought your lunch from home.

KK: Were you able to get any free bottles or anything like that, or?

RB: Free bottles?

KK: Yeah, you know from working out there. Like sometimes Subway does, you get a free sandwich when you work on a shift? No?

RB: No. We didn't have free bottles. We had a little club. We had a little club where we played softball, among ourselves. There was a bowling team. And golf league. Yeah. They had recreation things. They had a beautiful park that was out in Godfrey. Beautiful acres of park. It had a pavilion, area for playing softball, a little lake to fish. And things for kids to play on. And they had an annual picnic every year. So there's a lot of benefits there you know. For socializing. Then they had a club-room across the street from the glass-works. They would meet there for different club organizations and union meetings and things like that. Yeah. It was fun. The groups, the groups too. The interactive club, with just the people on that shift. But then when we had a big picnic it would be different ones from different shifts would come to the party you know. So it was nice. We had Christmas parties and yeah, they had things for families too.

KK: That's really nice. Did you face any challenges while working there, at all?

RB: Facing what?

KK: Difficulties with the factory, co-workers, management?

RB: No, no I didn't. I got along well with the girls I worked with. And management, they didn't harass you or anything or make you work in an unsafe environment. It was always really, in fact sometimes, we would be working and one of the supervisors would be down, walking around, you know, and if he would stop to pick up a box...I'll never forget this, there was a union rep standing on the walkway, the catwalk, they called it, and company man would stop to pick up a box or something, and the union man [slapping sound]. The company could not interfere with our work, with what we're doing. It was a union representative walking around. he was a worker, but he was observing, too. to see if anyone from the company interfered or mistreated the workers. So, I didn't ever see any interference or, you know, things from the union. And I would go to union meetings. You had to pay dues to be in the union. The company, I thought, they were pretty good to the workers. It was a safe environment, because if you got hurt you immediately would go to the medical office there. And if you felt ill you'd upstairs to the lady in charge of the hour that we worked. She was our supervisor call her. And you'd go up there if you had a phone call to call home, she would contact your family. If someone at home called you, say a member at home was sick, they'd get in touch with you. And they'd bring you up, they get someone to replace you on your job, and they bring you upstairs to talk on the phone. Because I had a son who had asthma, and, I got called several times and I had to leave work and take him to the hospital, because he was having an asthma attack. And there was never any problem about me leaving work, you know, to see about him. So, all in all, I thought it was a very good environment to work. I don't have nothing to

compare it to because I had never worked before. But after I had worked there for a couple of years and I realized, this isn't the place I'm want to spend 30 years, because I was talking with the different girls there who worked there. And most of them had worked there since they were 17, 16, out of high school. And some of them didn't finish high school. And I said, we weren't supposed to talk about how much money you made, you know, but you did. You found out you know without asking, really. it came up after I had been there several years, talking with an older woman about working there. And she had been there a long time and, I don't know how the money part came in, but I found out she was only making fifty cents an hour more than me. And I had only been there like 3 years. And I said, "You've been here how long?" "Twenty-five years." And she was glad to have the job. You know? I said, "Oh." I was just talking with her, and I talked with several other people, and so when the young girls would come and work in the summer, you know. When school was out, they'd come and get a job in the summer, and they'd go back to school. I would tell them, "You don't want to stay here for no twenty-five or thirty years." I said, "This is okay for the summer, but you go back to school and get an education. Because you don't want to spend..." They were really nice ladies but I could not imagine myself staying there that long and still making just fifty-cents more than what the girls who just walked in the door were making. Because, by then, they were renegotiating, and wages were getting better, and the union wasn't working to improve the working environment. So I encouraged the young girls who came to work in the summer to go back to school. You don't want to stay here. She was a nice lady, but she was old and thin, and reachin' up and pullin' these boxes down. She didn't really have to do that...if the boxes got jammed up she would lift them off and sit them on the floor, and they'd pick 'em up. And she was an older woman. And I said, "No. You don't want to do this when you get that old." So I encouraged the younger girls, you know, work for a little while, but then go back to school. This is not what you want to do for the next thirty, forty years. But, the ladies I had talked to, they had worked there since they were 17. And bought a home and raised their family, but things were not as high then. The economy was getting higher, things were changing. We'd been through another war. And things were just different. And I could see that. And the younger girls, they thought it was fun. They enjoyed it because they liked that paycheck and liked the hours and the shift, and it was a lot of fun. but then they would work a couple of summers and I never saw them back again. They went and got another job, probably, and graduated, and moved on. Very few stayed after I left. I stayed there, some of them stayed because they had families and had started buying a home. So they needed that paycheck if their husband's check didn't cover everything you know. Some of them stayed until they closed the factory down. Some of the younger ones left and went back to school.

KK: When you were talking about the economy was changing, during the wars. Would you liked to explain that a bit more?

RB: Well, I would say as the prices got up higher, the price of food and housing and everything started changing like that, and the money didn't go as far as it did when I first started out. Everything was higher by then. So the check that you made just didn't go as far. It's just like it is now, your paycheck doesn't stretch as far this year as it did last year. Because the groceries are going up higher, every time you go to the grocery store, the prices are up again. That's the way it was, even then. I noticed it. I don't know, I imagine those other ladies did. One lady, she'd been there....she was like fifty-five years old, and she'd been there twenty, twenty, thirty years. but she's only fifty-five. So she couldn't retire and get social security or anything. And then when they started closing down, offering you to retire, a lot of them had the time, but weren't old enough. You see what I mean? And they wouldn't get the full

benefits, because of the difference. And this lady, she'd been there all that time, but she wasn't old enough to get full retirement. So they lost part of their retirement money. I don't know...it was...interesting when you look at it like that. But when I first went there it was just fun for me. Because my husband was still alive and I wasn't completely dependent on my paycheck. My paycheck didn't have to pay all the bills and things. Some of the girls, they did. They were single. Yeah, it was interesting. In the fun time, we had lots of fun activities, too. Playing softball and bowling. And that's where I learned to play golf. And they even offered a self-defense classes. Little things like that. Perks, I called them. They always offered something. It was a good company until everything started changing. I think they changed ownership. Then the next thing you know, they were talking about safety. Because we didn't wear goggles or hearing aids. Actually, my hearing's not too good. I say that, but my hearing...the noise level was really bad. Breaking glass all the time. I think the company changed hands and they came in with the glasses for us to wear. Lot of people didn't wear the glasses because they weren't used to it. Some of them wore the glasses. I noticed different things, different safety things started coming around. They start checking when they change hands.

KK: That kind of makes me think about this next question: Owens Illinois was actually really well known for being environmentally ahead of its time. They had recycling centers, they were really well known for their safety, as well as the clean factories. Do you want to further that those thoughts?

RB: It was. It was clean, yeah. i thought it was. I had nothing to compare it with, but I thought it was always clean, the environment where we worked. It was well kept, they seemed to care about your safety. Because if you got hurt, you immediately had someone to come and take your place and you went over to the nurse's office. I remember when someone in my family got sick, I had to go home. They didn't hesitate to have me replaced, or tell me to wait an hour or so. I could immediately leave and they found someone to replace me. And I could go take care of my family. And when they would shut down for the summer they would offer you to work in another area if you wanted to, if you didn't want to take the time off. Because I left packing bottles and went to making boxes one summer just to try it out. I didn't care much for it. It was different but I didn't think I wanted to work there all the time. So I worked there but one summer. And the next summer when they closed down I just took the time off and just started back. Because they had a lull in orders, orders started slowing down, and they would close it, for a couple of weeks. You could take the time off. Or, if you they had room for you, you could work over in the boxes. And then they had it where you worked on a layer, and then above you they made boxes, and they would send the boxes down to you on the runner to pack. The boxes would come down and you would pack them up and push them out to the big layer, where they usually had a young man there, assigned to pull them off and pack them off. To take them to the warehouse. So everything was moving, you know? Boy, you didn't want to stop. because the bottles would back up. And the men in back, they would come out. They had a good job going, no defects, the men out back who made the bottles, they would come out sometimes and watch us pack their bottles. To see how we were doing. Packing up the wares. And they'd say, "Got a good job today." And I'd say, "This one has a fault in it. Fix it." But the inspector, she would find it, cut it, and write a little note in it, and send it in the back room for them. "This was too thin. One side of the bottle was too thin." they'd have to pull that mold off. We'd fix it in the back room, and send it back down the layer again. But in the summer it was really hot there. it was like 100-some degrees. Standing there. Sometimes they had extra girls in the warehouse, and they would come up and pull bottles off that were defects. Before you packed them there were a couple of girls that would stand there, and they'd give them a stick that they'd use and lift the bottles up,

or you'd reach over and get them, and pull off a whole row of bottles that were melted on one side, or the neck of the bottle was crooked. But, they would tell the guy in the back, that that certain bottle, with that number on it, was defective, and they'd have to stop that whole row of bottles from coming out. And some of them were still coming out and they'd have to call someone up to pull them off and throw them away before they went down the line for the girls to pack. Because they couldn't stop. They would move, I loved that, you'd get a girl that would move, changed, get a turn to sit under the light and as you sit there like this. [Motions] You knock 'em off, knock 'em down in the run. One time we were knocking a bunch. A man from out back came, "What are you fooling [inaudible] way for?" I said "It's no good. Fix it." [Laughs] They didn't like to hear that crashing. Oh they would come from out back, cuz they were making bonus money, see. At that time there was a bonus if they made good ware. If they all got packed, they made more money. And they could kind of take a break and rest. Because they had it all fixed up, and the bottles were coming out being packed up. And going out. Yeah, it was good. Now you got plastic. So you don't have the glass factory anymore. Everything is plastic now.

KK: When you were talking about doing the cardboard in the summer, you said you didn't like it. What about it did you not like?

RB: The dust. Dust falling all over you. You'd be covered with dust. It was interesting making it, the boxes, but I didn't care for it. Because it was a little bit dusty, and very hot. You'd put the boxes on a huge runway. They would run on a big roller in the warehouse, like a train. Like Track A, it would automatically roll down here, then it would turn and come back up this way. It was interesting. But I didn't care that much for it. It was kind of quiet, too. There wasn't a lot of people there like it was when you were packing bottles. It was interesting, but...I'd rather be over there where there's more activity. There was one area where they made this big gallon bottle. We had the only mold for that in the United States. Europe didn't even have one. It was a five gallon jug. You ever see those big milk jugs? Yeah, we made those down there. And we had the only mold for that. I didn't never work there because they were so large. They had a special crew that went over there and worked. I went over there one summer when work was slow, rather than take time off, I volunteered to go over there and work. It was interesting. But it was too quiet and slow. Because it took a long time for those big jugs to come out. Then you'd just pick them up and pack them. Then they shipped them overseas or wherever you know.

KK: Whenever you found out that the plan was going to close down what did you think?

RB: I thought, oh wow. I was about ready to retire, though. I think I had my youngest son there. I was ready to leave because my husband had gotten a job. He was working a good job and I could spend more time at home with my youngest son. I had another child that I wasn't expecting at the time. All my kids were in school and then after ten years, here comes this other baby. So, it was kind of like a bonus. Then I could spend more time with him because the other kids were older and I could spend more time. He turned out to be asthmatic. He was the one that I had to leave work all the time and go take him to the doctor. I had to run up to Scott Air Force base all the time to see the doctor up there. When they started getting ready to close down it affected a lot of people, because people, like I said, had been there since they were straight out of high school but they weren't eligible, they weren't sixty-two, to get retirement money. Well, I was. I had been there that long, that I could start drawing, I could get my benefits. And then a few years later I could get social security. But a lot of them couldn't because they had the forty years, but they weren't old enough. So it was a lot of talk, conversations about....they had felt like, it

wasn't coming out for them right. There was this one lady, she was, at the time, she had been there over thirty years. but she wasn't old enough. I think she was only like fifty-something. And that was really too old to start another career. And this one was being taken away....So, it was a lot of emotional problems going on. Husband and wives worked there, there was a lot of husbands and wives there, who worked. But it didn't affect me, financially as it did some of the others people there.

KK: So did the company ever help them try to find other jobs? Like try to look at trades and see if they could be located somewhere else?

RB: They had little classes and talked to them about what could d job-wise. A lot of them left there and went to the Ollens (Spelling). Went down here to Ollen down in East Alton. Several of them went down there. And some of them just retired and got other little jobs around. Some of them had savings, I guess, and they just had a couple of years to go before they could reach that age. I was able to get a pension because I had vested rights. I had been there long enough. I got a small benefit. The other people the amount they were getting wasn't enough to cover expenses. I don't think they union could do anything to help them because, they had sold the company. It was sad to see them leave the place. Because, like I say, it was a lot of fun. It was like a big family. We always had things to do after work. It was a good place to work.

KK: Whenever the factory had finally shut down were there any talk of what was going to be put in its place or were they just going, just gonna?

RB: Well there was talk about some of them staying there but, some of them were dissatisfied. I heard a lot of disgruntled people talking, and they didn't like it. And the union was negotiating with them, there was a lot of talk about it, but, as far as I can remember, there wasn't much they could do about it because it was a done deal. They were going to sell and they were going to close it down. They didn't close everything down at once because there was still another factory down in Godfrey, Illinois where people were working. But those down there on Broadway, those who could collect the benefits, they got them and then left. Some of them when to Ollen and worked and some of them were just out of work.

KK: After the plant shut down it definitely affected the economy?

RB: Yes, it did. I would say so. Yes, They had like four shifts, and that's a lot of people. Some of them, like I said, went to Ollen but the older people, the men, I don't think they could go. Some of them I think....I don't remember really if some of them went out of town to work. There was another factory that some of them went to Indiana, I believe, and worked. If I remember correctly, some of them went up there. This friend of mine was a supervisor, he was offered the job but he didn't take it. He stayed on in East Alton.

KK: Did any of the businesses here in Alton, since I know a lot of them kind of relied on the factory, did you see any other shut downs of mom-and-pop shops or was it just unaffected by it? What would you say?

RB: Well, yes. The Bonaire. That was right across the street from it. That was there they all gathered before work and after work. But as far as I know, it didn't affect them, as far as I know, because I didn't

go there. But a lot of people would go there before work and after work. But I think they continue to do business, as far as I know, they didn't financially affect them.

KK: So after the plant had shut down and other people had found other jobs or retired, did you retire right away? Or did you end up working for the NAACP sooner rather than later? How did that come about?

RB: No, I retired and I stayed home for a while. And then my daughter was working for Miller's Mutual Insurance and she asked me did I want to go to work. I said yeah I would, because I would like to have that extra money. I call it mad money [Laughs]. So I said yeah. There was a job open in the cafeteria. They had a cafeteria at Miller's Mutual Insurance. so I applied there and I went to work in the cafeteria part in the cafeteria part. I worked like 10 to 1 or 2 in the afternoon. Four hours I think I worked, punching meal tickets. Then after that I would help do the dishes. Rinse dishes and put them in the dish washer. But at lunch time I would sit on a stool in the cafeteria and punch the girls' meal tickets. I had to add real quick. They got each item was so much and I sat there and add it up in my head, because I didn't have a machine. I sat there and added it up and punched their meal ticket. And they'd go through the line and eat lunch. Then after lunch I would help with the stack the dishes in the dish washer. Then after that, I did that for a couple of years, I liked it because I was still able to take my young son to school in the morning. And if he had an asthma attack it would only usually happen if they cut the grass before 10 in the morning. So if they cut the grass and he had an asthma attack I could go get him and bring him home. And I had a babysitter for him and I would go to work. I was only gone like 4 hours. And after I worked there they had a job opening in the mail room. So I bid in on the job to move up to the mail room. It was a full-time job. And that's what I did, I moved to the mail room at Miller's Mutual Insurance. Where you go around the office and pick up the mail off the desks who had policies and everything they had to do. I'd go up, pick those up off their desk, bring back to the mail room, and sort it out and get it ready to go through the postage machine and mail it out. The other young man that worked there, he was son-in-law. And they said, "You're gonna work for your son in law?" And I said, "Well yeah, I can work for my son-in-law. I know how to follow directions." [Laughs] They said, "He's going to be telling you what to do!" I said, "Well if he tells me what to do, I'll do it" It wasn't a problem. Everyone said, "Oh, I don't know about that." I said, "Hey, don't you know how to follow directions?" [Laughs] So I worked there until I retired. Well they shut down. They started downsizing the Millers Mutual, too. So I had to go through another downsizing. And then I stayed at home after that. A girlfriend I had known from Edwardsville, went to school with, she was living over here, and I met here. And one day she asked me, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Oh nothing much, why?" She said, "My husband is the President of the NAACP and he needs a secretary." And I said, "Well I don't know how to be a secretary." "Yeah you'd only have to do it for a couple of weeks before they find someone because the girl quit. Just do it for about a month, maybe, until he finds someone." I said, "Well, okay." She said "All you have to do is take down the minutes of the meeting and then that's it." I said, "Well okay, I can do that." Cuz I had done that kind of volunteer work before when we were in the air force. Worked for different committees. So I said okay. I went. I'm retiring this year. I've been there since...oh....twenty years. Yeah. [Laughs]

KK: That month lasted pretty long.

RB: Yeah [Laughs] That couple of weeks turned into. But I enjoy it. It was fascinating. I loved it. I loved working with him, Mr. Gray. His name is Mr. James Gray. I love working with him. He's retiring also. So I said, "If you're retiring, I am too." And I kind of had health issues with my arthritis and my eye-sight and my hearing, so, it's time for me to a stay at home grandparent. Great grandparent.

KK: So when you were working at the NAACP as a Secretary you were talking about how you would take minutes. Was it just that or did you end up doing more and more?

RB: No, well yeah, really...When they started building the new high school they had to get the proposition passed. Well I had to help with folding up papers and sending them out. And then at different meetings, for hiring minorities contractors, to build the new school. Well we had to go to the different meetings. He would have us go to different meetings. Myself and two of my friends. We were elderly ladies, and he would call me up and say, "I need you to meet me at the hotel, at the Holiday Inn, we're gonna have a meeting at 10 o'clock." And I'd go get the car and pick up another lady and another lady and we'd go to this meeting. And we'd sit there and listen to the meeting. And just sit there. And then when the meeting was over he would thank us. Then we would leave. We went to so many meetings. We were at one meeting because they were talking about minority companies. One lady up walked up and said, "What construction company do you own?" We looked at each other and said, "We don't own a construction company." "Oh you don't?" "No, were just grandparents who have an interest in the school because we have our grandchildren and our children in the school. And we would love to have a better school so they can have the best education that they're entitled to." They said, "Oh..." because at the time they were hiring minority companies. So they thought we were a minority company who might get the contract. So they wanted to know what company did we represent. [Laughs] It was interesting. Very interesting. I thought that was great. Then watching Mr. Gray handle different situations that he did around town. It was really interesting. Like getting the police to hire black policemen and the firefighters here in Alton. helping open up jobs and helping young men who had been incarcerated get back into society you know, to get a new start. All kinds of interesting stuff like that, I observed him doing. I went to several meetings with him. It was very interesting.

KK: Did you ever take part in that?

RB: No, I just took notes. [Laughs] Took notes and listened. Because he had it all figured out and together. It's a lot of book work because we have to have an election every so often. And I have to have all the membership up-to-dated and make sure all the members are notified about the meeting. And I have to be at the election from 6 in the morning to 6 that evening to make sure they can vote and they're eligible to vote. I have to keep records of their membership and make sure they're eligible to run for office, and to vote for the office.

KK: Well since you will be retiring in a year and you want to hang out with the grand-babies

RB: [Laughs] Right. That's what I plan to do. Hang out with my great grandchildren. Bake cookies with the great grandson. Yeah.

KK: That's so sweet! Do you think they're going to stay around here in Alton as well? Do you think you'll see them grow up here?

RB: I hope to, yes. I would love to because Alton is a good place. It's a good place to raise kids. And I'm close to Edwardsville, and that's where I grew up. And my sister still is in Edwardsville and I have roots here. At the cemetery. [Laughs] My husband, this is his home. he grew up here. And I have a few relatives here, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, family friends, my church.

KK: So do you hope to see another, not industrial boom, but do you hope to see another surge of economic growth?

RB: Yes, I hope to see that. And so far, it's beginning to happen. I read the paper all the time. I get the *Telegraph* all the time. And I read it, it's interesting to see what's going on down in East Alton, with the building of these warehouses down there. I was talking to one of my grandchildren and he's working down there and he said there's lots of work down there. Sometimes he gets to work and sometimes he doesn't because a lot of people, they get there at like 5 in the morning. And most of them are of the illegal people who have crossed the border. And they are in this area and they get there at like 4 o'clock in the morning before he can get up and get down there. And they're already first in line to get the jobs. So a lot of times he wouldn't get picked to work the area. Because they lived down that way, I guess close to 270. They pick them first. Then when they fill up the line he would have to turn around and come back home. He kept going and finally he's working pretty steady. But he did run into that problem of them being down there first in line to get the work. And a lot of the young people who live here in this area got turned away. That's what he told me. I didn't go down there. But he kept going though, so he's working pretty steady. Because they have increased the warehouse And if he missed going at this warehouse, he'll go to another one And he's able to get on the job. His problem is he has a record. I said, "I thought they're not supposed to hold that against you any more, I thought you didn't have to put that on your application anymore." He said, "Well sometimes they do." So it's pretty hard for him to try and get back into the work force after he's been incarcerated. But he's still trying. I said "Well that's what you have to do." I said, "that's just a lesson learned. Pass it on to your friends. Just stay out of trouble." Because the record will follow you. **KK:** So what are your hopes for Alton in the future years?

RB: Oh that it becomes...this has started out to be more inclusive. Include everyone. Don't clique here, and this little group here. Just come together and work together to make it good for everyone. So everyone has a fair chance. Job-wise, living conditions, everything. If you work, you should be entitled. Don't go back, go forward. That's what I'm hoping to see for my grandchildren. If he's qualified for that job and he passes the test and he's number one, he should get the job. Not say, "Oh well, come back tomorrow." And then you go back tomorrow and then "oh the job's filled." By someone else. That's what I'm hoping for. I hope to live to see that. I lived to see a black President. I never thought I'd live to see that, but I did. So I'm still praying and hoping. And I think I see it coming. but it's going to take time. Hearts will have to change, not just paper, not just rules on paper. People's hearts will have to change.

KK: Is there anything that you would like to see come to Alton? Anything fun or library you know, anything?

RB: I can't think of anything right now. No, I can't think of anything [Laughs] Like what for instance?"

KK: Oh, I don't know just anything that would be neat that Alton doesn't already have.

RB: I can't think of anything right off the bat.

KK: Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't discussed? With Alton or you, your family?"

RB: I can't think of anything, Kayla. [Laughs] Um, it's been an interesting interview. I had no idea. But I like living in Alton. I like Edwardsville. I can see it changing, and I'm hoping for the better. For the young people today. It's an awesome group. I was at the banquet last night with one-hundred black men, and I saw that the group of people there were working for a better country. That's what I would love to see. Everyone working together to make it better for everyone. The kids they gave out recognition to last night, the things that they are working towards. It's to make everything better. To include everyone. Not just a few. That's what would make a better world.

KK: Well, thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate the opportunity. And it's been really wonderful meeting you.

RB: Oh, it's nice meeting you. I had no idea it would be like this; but it's been interesting. Thank you, Kayla, for choosing me to help you with your program. I wish you all the success.

Kayla: Thank you.